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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the exophoric function of the pronouns "it, they, he, she" and related forms in four English conversations. It analyzed the frequency and characteristics of the occurrence of those exophoric pronouns and found that they were much less frequent than endophoric pronouns. It also found that the exophoric pronoun groups themselves vary in frequency and functions and concluded that several variables may determine the use of these pronouns, including topic and the speakers' shared knowledge. If the speakers discuss objects and persons in the setting, they tend to use exophoric pronouns. If a man is discussed, this influences the frequency of the use of "he," and if the man is somehow central to the speakers and their conversation topic, it is likely to influence the frequency of the exophoric use of "he." (MSE)

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EXOPHORA IN ENGLISH CONVERSATION

A Study of Third Person Pronominal Reference

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Exophora in English conversation
A study of third person pronominal reference*

1 Introduction

"They told me you had been to her,
And mentioned me to him:
She gave me a good character,
But said I could not swim.
He sent them word I had not gone
(We know it to be true):
If she should push the matter on,
What would become of you?
I gave her one, they gave him two,
You gave us three or more;
They all returned from him to you,
Though they were mine before.
If I or she should chance to be
Involved in this affair,
He trusts to you to set them free,
Exactly as we were.
My notion was that you had been
(Before she had this fit)
An obstacle that came between
Him, and ourselves, and it.
Don't let him know she liked them best,
For this must ever be
A secret, kept from all the rest,
Between yourself and me."

* This study has been carried out at the Survey of Spoken English, University of Lund, with financial support from The Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation.

This poem from Alice in Wonderland is a successful example of deliberately unsuccessful communication. The poem contains a large number of empty pronouns, and it is not possible to identify the referent for a single pronoun. As we are normally not used to empty pronouns, they add to the bizarre atmosphere. We have to agree with Alice when she says "*I* don't believe there's an atom of meaning in it" (Carroll 1960:159).

Real pronominal reference, on the other hand, is either used *endophorically* (textual reference) or *exophorically* (extra-textual reference). In endophoric reference there is a referent in the text which is coreferent with the pronoun. In exophoric reference the referent has to be retrieved from outside the text, or from what is said in the conversation.

Exophoric reference can be of two kinds:[1]

1. the reference is deictic and made to the actual, concrete setting of the situation, e.g. to something that can be seen or heard

2. the reference is made to the abstract context-of-situation, which includes everything that is relevant for the conversation, i.e. reference is made to the shared knowledge or common ground of the participants.

These two types of exophoric reference have in common the fact that they refer to a specific referent, i.e. a person, a thing, etc. There is also a kind of "generalized exophoric reference" (Halliday & Hasan 1976:53). This includes the case of 'they' meaning 'persons unspecified', and 'it' meaning 'things', 'business', 'the situation' (cf. also Bolinger 1977:77 and 1979:290). In this case the pronouns have a generalized reference, but the referent still belongs to the context-of-situation of the actual conversation. I do not agree with Halliday & Hasan that "the referent is treated as being as it were immanent in all contexts of situations" (1976:53).

As the context of a written text differs considerably from that of a spoken text, it can be expected that the frequency and function of exophoric reference in spoken language will differ from that in written language. When I mention spoken language as opposed to written language, I mean impromptu speech or spontaneous conversation as opposed to written language in print. There are, of course, many variants of spoken language as well as of written language, and if we take some of these into account, a scale of the following kind may be set up:

conversation
discussion
debate
commentary
oration: spontaneous
oration: prepared but unwritten
oration: written
non-printed, written texts
printed, written texts

As can be seen, the scale encompasses types from spontaneous speech to written language in print. In between we find various kinds of more or less free or prepared forms of language. The types on the scale sometimes overlap and are also contained in one another. The scale does not pretend to be complete, and variables such as prepared-unprepared, monologue-dialogue, formal-informal, etc. have as a rule not been taken into account.

The reasons for expecting differences in the use of pronouns between the spoken and the written channels are several. One reason is that there is such an abundance of devices and clues to facilitate the interpretation of a pronoun in a conversation that are not present in the context of a written text. Prosody, paralanguage, and body language contribute to the understanding of exophoric reference. The fact that a conversation is a process of interaction also contributes to the understanding. The speakers provide one another with constant feedback and signals so they can coordinate their systems. The relationships between the speakers and the degree of shared knowledge between them can vary. If the speakers are friends and familiar with one another, they have established a common ground and a common discourse model, which they make use of when referring outside what is actually said, and when interpreting exophoric pronouns.

On the other hand, people may make unsuccessful references in conversation, or the tracing of referents may be made difficult through repetitions, interruptions, or incomplete utterances. In written language, references are as a rule successful and the referents easy to locate in the text.

A few more words should perhaps be said about the role of presupposition and shared knowledge in conversation. The participants' experience and knowledge of the world, their social backgrounds, and their relationships

constitute a context and a common ground, which provide them with certain possibilities for making assumptions. The larger the area of shared knowledge, the more certain a speaker can be that a listener will understand the meaning of an implicit, exophoric reference.

Even if endophoric reference is more frequent than exophoric, both in written and in spoken language, it can be expected that exophoric reference will be more frequent in conversation than in written language.

2 *Material and method*

The aim of the present investigation is to describe the exophoric function of the pronouns IT, THEY, HE, and SHE in a corpus of English conversation. The study is part of a more extensive investigation I have carried out on the referential function of third person pronouns. The corpus I have used is the London-Lund corpus of spoken English (LLC). This corpus comprises "texts" of spoken language ranging from face-to-face spontaneous conversation, recorded surreptitiously, to prepared but unscripted oration. The texts consist of c. 5000 words each and have been subject to a painstaking prosodic and paralinguistic analysis at the Survey of English Usage, University College London. The material was taken over in 1975 by the Survey of Spoken English in Lund where we have transferred it to computer magnetic tape in order to make it available to researchers all over the world.[2]

For this study eight texts were chosen from the category of spontaneous face-to-face conversations, surreptitiously recorded. In all, these eight conversations amount to 40.000 words. The speakers are all educated British people. In six of the texts (1.1, 1.3, 1.4, 1.5, 1.6, 1.8) the speakers' relationships have been described as "intimate and equal", i.e. they are colleagues and friends. There are between two and four speakers per text. In the remaining two texts (3.3, 3.4) there are six participants per text, and the relationships have been characterized as "distant".

The texts were chosen to satisfy the following criteria: Each text should consist of one whole conversation. There are texts which consist of several subjects to add up to the stipulated 5000 words, but none of these have been included. I also excluded texts in which one or more non-surreptitious speakers, or speakers who were aware of being recorded, participated. These

speakers functioned as 'prompters' and were to keep the conversation going.[3]

In the present study, IT represents not only 'it' (i.e. the word forms *it, its, itself*) but also the demonstratives 'this' and 'that' in head function. In this function 'this' and 'that' refer in their own right just like 'it'. As determiners 'this' and 'that' were not included as they have no independent function of reference. THEY denotes 'they' (*they, them, their, theirs*, and *themselves*) as well as 'these' and 'those' in head position. HE denotes the word forms *he, him, his, himself*; SHE denotes *she, her, hers*, and *herself*.

The pronouns can occur either in *simple references*, i.e. there is only one pronominal instance per referent, e.g.

look at *him*

or they occur in what I called *chains*, i.e. two or more instances of the pronoun referring to the same referent, e.g.

look at *him, he* seems fairly young

All coreferential pronouns included in a chain refer to the same exophoric referent. The fact that there is also an endophoric relation between the pronouns in a chain has been disregarded in this study. Only the exophoric relation to the original referent has been taken into account.

The pronouns were classified and coded according to the following scheme:

IT

XG - exophoric, general
XSC - exophoric, specific, ref. to context-of-situation
XSS - exophoric, specific, ref. to setting

THEY

XG - exophoric, general
XSHS - exophoric, specific, ref. to humans in the setting
XSOS - exophoric, specific, ref. to objects or phenomena in the setting
XSHC - exophoric, specific, ref. to humans belonging to the context-of--situation

XSOC - exophoric, specific, ref. to objects or phenomena belonging to the context-of-situation

HE

XSS - exophoric, specific, ref. to setting
XSC - exophoric, specific, ref. to context-of-situation

SHE

XSS - exophoric, specific, ref. to setting
XSC - exophoric, specific, ref. to context-of-situation

The codes were fed into the computer together with other variables for texts, speakers, simple references, and chains, and a standard statistical program SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) was run with relevant options.

3 Results

As was expected, pronouns referring to an exophoric referent are much less frequent than those with an endophoric referent. Table 1 shows that only 10.7% (252/2365) of the pronouns refer to an extra-textual referent.

	N	X	Row total
IT	1002	142	1144 48.4%
THEY	429	79	508 21.5%
HE	513	31	544 23.0%
SHE	169	-	169 7.1%
Column total	2113 89.3%	252 10.7%	2365 100%

Table 1. Frequencies of endophoric (N) and exophoric (X) pronouns

IT is the most frequent pronoun. This is, of course, an obvious result as IT has a wider area of referential functions than the other pronouns. Many of these functions fall within the endophoric area, but IT is also more frequent than THEY, HE, and SHE as an exophoric pronoun. THEY comes next in frequency and, referring both to animates and non-animates, has a wider referential area than HE, which is normally restricted to male animates. The total numbers of HE and THEY are very similar but THEY is more than twice as frequent as HE as an exophoric pronoun. SHE only accounts for 7.1% (169/2365) of the whole referential pronominal material, and there is not a single instance of an exophoric SHE in a corpus of 40.000 words. HE accounted for 31 exophoric instances. One cannot help wondering whether this does not display a general tendency. In this corpus people do not speak very often about females. And, if females are referred to with SHE at all, those who refer are mostly females themselves. One should perhaps ask: Is this significant for our society? Do we not talk about women? And, why do men not talk more about women?

IT

	1.1	1.3	1.4	1.5	1.6	1.8	3.3	3.4	Row total
'it'	6	11	18	2	4	9	2	9	61 43.0%
'this'	2	5	19	1	1	8	3	5	44 31.0%
'that'	-	1	22	-	2	12	-	-	37 26.1%
IT	8	17	59	3	7	29	5	14	142 100%

Table 2. IT: Frequency of IT with exophoric referent

Table 2 shows how exophoric IT is distributed over the eight texts. It also shows the proportions of 'it', 'this', and 'that' to IT. The most frequent variant is 'it'; 'this' and 'that' are fairly similar in number (44 and 37, respectively). 1.4 and 1.8 have the largest proportion of 'that'. These two texts have one main topic in common. In both texts, university colleagues are choosing

pictures for their office walls. This involves a great deal of pointing and also use of 'that'. This conversation topic is also reflected in the total number of IT for these texts; 1.4 has 59/142 exophoric IT, and 1.8 has 29/142; these are the highest figures. Again, the discussion of pictures involves a great deal of pointing and exophoric reference to the pictures. The frequencies for the remaining texts are low, between 3 and 17, and it is hard to say anything about them.

	1.1	1.3	1.4	1.5	1.6	1.8	3.3	3.4	Row total
XG	6	9	-	2	4	-	2	-	23 16.2%
XSC	-	4	-	-	1	-	-	-	5 3.5%
XSS	2	4	59	1	2	29	3	14	114 80.3%
Column total	8	17	59	3	7	29	5	14	142 100%

Table 3. IT: Types of exophoric reference

Table 3 shows that reference to the setting (XSS), i.e. to phenomena that can be seen, heard, etc. is by far the most common type in the entire material. If we look at the individual texts, however, it is quite obvious that texts 1.4 and 1.8 are special in this respect also. 1.4 has 59 cases of IT referring to the setting and no case of general exophoric reference or reference to the abstract context-of-situation. All instances of exophoric reference in 1.8 (29) also belong to the same category. Exophoric reference to the context-of-situation is on the whole very rare, only 5 instances (3.5%). General exophoric reference amounted to 16.2%.

Tables 4 and 5 show the frequencies and types of simple references and chains. Of the simple references (only one pronoun referring to a referent), 58.5% refer to the setting and 39.6% have a general exophoric reference. Specific reference to the context-of-situation hardly occurs. For the individual texts the frequencies are too low to form any basis for comparison. 1.8 has the largest number of simple references, however, and they are XSS. 1.3 has 11 simple references divided between XG and XSS.

	1.1	1.3	1.4	1.5	1.6	1.8	3.3	3.4	Row total
XG	6	7	-	2	4	-	2	-	21 39.6%
XSC	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	1 1.9%
XSS	2	4	7	1	2	12	1	2	31 58.5%
Column total	8	11	7	3	7	12	3	2	53 100%

Table 4. IT: Simple references – type of X referent

	1.1	1.3	1.4	1.5	1.6	1.8	3.3	3.4	Row total
XG	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	1 3.3%
XSC	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	1 3.3%
XSS	-	-	17	-	-	7	1	3	28 93.3%
Column total	-	2	17	-	-	7	1	3	30 100%

Table 5. IT: Chains – type of X referent

Table 5 shows the distribution of exophoric chains over types and texts. There are 30 chains in all, and as many as 28 (93.3%) are XSS. There is one striking figure, viz. 17 for text 1.4. As we know, 1.4 and 1.8 have one common main topic. When studying these conversations closely one can, however, perceive one difference between them. The speakers in 1.4 seem more intimate and used to one another than those in 1.8. Their "common ground" seems large. They even manage to keep several chains, relating to different referents and topics, going on at the same time. This may be one reason for the figure in 1.4. The speakers in 1.8, although also intimates, use more simple references, thus probably repeating the pointing procedure when they refer to an object in the setting.

There were 53 simple references and 30 chains. The chains contained in all 89 instances of IT. The average number of ITs per chain is 3.

THEY

	1.1	1.3	1.4	1.5	1.6	1.8	3.3	3.4	Row total
'they'	4	13	10	18	5	15	9	–	74 93.7%
'these'	–	–	3	–	–	–	–	–	3 3.8%
'those'	–	–	–	–	–	2	–	–	2 2.5%
THEY	4	13	13	18	5	17	9	–	79 100%

Table 6. THEY: Frequency of THEY with exophoric referent

The proportion of 'they' to THEY is much larger (93.7%) than the proportions of 'these' and 'those' (see Table 6). There are only very few cases of 'these' and 'those'. The distribution of THEY over the texts is also shown in Table 6. The number of exophoric THEY varies between 0 and 18. Text 3.4 has not one single instance of exophoric THEY.

	1.1	1.3	1.4	1.5	1.6	1.8	3.3	3.4	Row total
XG	–	–	1	–	–	–	–	–	1 1.3%
XSHS	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
XSOS	–	–	3	–	–	12	–	–	15 19.0%
XSHC	4	13	9	18	5	5	9	–	63 79.8%
XSOC	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Column total	4	13	13	18	5	17	9	–	79 100%

Table 7. THEY: Types of exophoric reference

Table 7 reveals that 79.8% of exophoric THEY refer to humans in the context-of-situation, i.e. to people who are not mentioned but who are easily identified by the speakers through their knowledge of the situation. Two texts have instances of THEY referring to objects in the setting. Text 1.4 has 3 instances and they all refer to the pictures under discussion. Text 1.8 has 12 instances and 11 of these refer to the pictures. This topic obviously has a strong influence. There are no references to humans in the setting or to objects in the context-of-situation.

Tables 8 and 9 show the frequencies and types of simple references and chains. There are 20 simple references (Table 8) of which 17 (85%) refer to humans in the contex-of-situation. Of 16 chains (Table 9) 13 refer to humans in the context-of-situation and 3 to objects in the setting. The 16 chains contained in all 59 instances of THEY. Thus a chain contains on an average 3.7 instances of THEY.

	1.1	1.3	1.4	1.5	1.6	1.8	3.3	3.4	Row total
XG	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	1 5%
XSHS	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
XSOS	-	-	1	-	-	1	-	-	2 10%
XSHC	2	1	-	7	3	1	3	-	17 85%
XSOC	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Column total	2	1	2	7	3	2	3	-	20 100%

Table 8. THEY: Simple references – type of X referent

	1.1	1.3	1.4	1.5	1.6	1.8	3.3	3.4	Row total
XG	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
XSHS	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
XSOS	-	-	1	-	-	2	-	-	3 18.8%
XSHC	1	1	3	4	1	1	2	-	13 81.2%
XSOC	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Column total	1	1	4	4	1	3	2	-	16 100%

Table 9. THEY: Chains – type of X referent

HE

	1.1	1.3	1.4	1.5	1.6	1.8	3.3	3.4	Row total
XSS	-	-	-	-	-	1	2	-	3 9.7%
XSC	-	-	13	4	-	11	-	-	28 90.3%
Column total	-	-	13	4	-	12	2	-	31 100%

Table 10. HE: Types of exophoric reference

There are only 31 cases of exophoric HE in the whole material (Table 10). Of these as many as 25 occur in the texts 1.4 and 1.8. All the 13 instances in 1.4 refer to the same person, who in fact is the one who has offered the speakers the choice of pictures. This person is then closely bound to the context and it is rarely necessary to mention him by name. In 1.8, 8 of the 12 instances of HE refer to the same person, who seems to be identical with the person in 1.4. Tables 11 and 12 show that there are only 3 simple references and 4 chains of exophoric HE. There are 2 chains, 1 in 1.4 and 1 in 1.8, that refer to the same person. These 2 chains are also very long. A chain contains on an average 7 instances of HE.

	1.1	1.3	1.4	1.5	1.6	1.8	3.3	3.4	Row total
XSS	-	-	-	-	-	1	2	-	3
XSC	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Column total	-	-	-	-	-	1	2	-	3

Table 11. HE: Simple references – type of X referent

	1.1	1.3	1.4	1.5	1.6	1.8	3.3	3.4	Row total
XSS	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
XSC	-	-	1	1	-	2	-	-	4
Column total	-	-	1	1	-	2	-	-	4

Table 12. HE: Chains – type of X referent

Conclusion

As this is a descriptive study of pronominal exophora in conversation only, no comparative results of differences between the spoken and the written channels can be given. The results of the investigation showed, however, that exophoric pronouns were much less frequent than endophoric pronouns. They also showed that the exophoric pronoun groups differed in frequency, which could probably be explained by the difference in their number of functions.

Reference to the setting was the most frequent type of exophoric reference of IT. The texts varied to a large extent, however, and the conversation topic seemed to have a decisive effect. The most frequent type of THEY was reference to humans known in the context-of-situation, i.e. humans belonging to the speaker's area of shared knowledge. There was one exceptional text where reference to objects in the setting was most frequent. This could be

explained by the specific topic. Topic was also a factor that explained that reference to males known in the context-of-situation was the most frequent type of HE. There was obviously no factor that created the need for using SHE with exophoric reference.

Although it is difficult to decide what variables can give rise to the use of an exophoric pronoun in conversation, topic seems to be important. The extent of the speakers' shared knowledge is certainly also important. There seem to be no obvious connections between the results and other variables such as the speakers' age, sex, and profession. Although the frequencies were in many cases too low to form a basis for such assumptions, I have come to the same result in the more extensive investigation I have carried out.

To conclude, then, it can be said that there must be certain specific situations characteristic of spontaneous speech that give rise to exophoric use of pronouns. If the speakers discuss objects and persons in the setting, they tend to use exophoric pronouns. If a man is discussed, this influences the frequency of HE; and if the man is in some way central to the speakers and what they are talking about, that is likely to influence the frequency of the exophoric use of HE.

NOTES

1 The scope of exophoric reference is not quite agreed on. Lyons (1977:672f.) has a wider definition of anaphora, which includes reference that would elsewhere be defined as exophora. Gutwinski (1976:67) has a more restricted definition of exophora.

2 For a detailed description of the corpus, see Svartvik & Quirk 1980.

3 At a fairly late stage, however, I was informed by the Survey of English Usage in London that two of the speakers in 1.3 (a text I had included) in fact had known about the recording. Nevertheless, I decided to keep the text as these speakers had only uttered small numbers of words, which would be of no statistical significance.

4 As has been mentioned, all pronouns included in an exophoric chain have been counted as exophoric here.

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